

When Baptists Bluff, or Believe

Winning Sermon in the 2007 Baptist Heritage Preaching Contest

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As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:28-29, NRSV).

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God (Gal. 4:6-7, NRSV).

Paul brought good news to the first-century Christians of Galatia, but nobody should be more capable of hearing it than twenty-first-century Baptists. Baptists typically have embraced Paul's message that the Law of Moses should lead us to Christ, where we are adopted into Christ's family. We have even called each other "brother this" and "sister that" for most of our history. Baptists have also agreed with Paul that the Spirit of Christ dwells in each member of this divine family. That Spirit cries out straight to God, "Abba! Father!" No problem there. Baptists have long preached that all Christians deal with God directly.

But when Paul argued in Galatians 3:28 that all worldly distinctions disappear in the Christian family, many Baptists balk. Of course, ignoring the distinction between Jews and Greek Gentiles comes naturally to us. After all, most Baptists are not Jewish, and we typically enjoy the freedom to skim quickly over major passages in Leviticus. But Paul did not stop there. In Christ, he said, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. That list could have continued. Paul could have gone on, but I do not think even he fully understood the implications of the good news he preached. Paul said we are *all one* in Christ Jesus.

Go on, Paul, because Baptists need to hear this list in full. At times, we have preached a powerful gospel of good news to the Christian family. Our message threatened to crumble the world's ridiculous hierarchies by dispelling the artificial distinctions that supported them. But on other occasions, we have acted like we do not realize what being one in Christ Jesus must surely mean. We have even come up with complex arguments along the way to avoid admitting that we are all siblings who answer only to God. Eventually, God will call our bluff.

That is what happened in a little Baptist church in Hancock County, Georgia, roughly 190 years ago. Jesse Mercer stepped into the pulpit at Powelton Baptist Church. On this particular day, Mercer was not preaching. He was serving as the moderator for a high-profile church trial. One of the church's members, a Brother Lancaster, had recently hosted a dance at his daughter's wedding. Many believed that dances welcomed the devil. Even worse, the wedding dance had included fiddling. Mercer thought Lancaster needed to be punished, but the congregation was divided, anxious, and tightly packed in their pews.¹

For most of Christian history, religious authorities have tried and punished unruly Christians like Lancaster. Among Baptists, church trials began disappearing only in the nineteenth century. Baptists took seriously Christ's instructions in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew. Believers needed to address sin in their churches directly. If a one-on-one conversation failed to produce repentance, a larger group of Christians should confront the sinner. If the individual still refused to repent, Christians were obligated to bring the stubborn member before the entire church.²

Like other Christians, Baptists turned over this ritual of discipline to the proper ecclesiastical authorities. For Baptists, however, ecclesiastical authority rested with the local church, so that was where jurisdiction over discipline typically stayed. Baptists looked to no higher court of appeal. Discerning members of the church served as judge and jury, and Baptists delivered their verdicts with votes.

Some Baptist churches seemed to understand more than others the religious, and even social, implications of the belief that Christians are one in Christ and deal directly with God. Baptists trusted, for instance, the discernment capacities of female Christians, often allowing them to vote on disciplinary matters. Enslaved members in biracial churches sometimes gave testimony or defended themselves in church courts. In the antebellum South, neither women nor enslaved believers enjoyed these privileges outside of the Christian community.³

But many Baptists paid too little attention to Galatians 3:28. Antebellum churches often limited voting on disciplinary matters to white men, paying deference to the patriarchal limitations of their southern slave society. Baptists continued to undermine social barriers by preaching an inclusive gospel of salvation, but spiritual egalitarianism did not translate into social and legal equality, even in the area of church discipline. Baptists in the South—every color, class, and gender—sunk up to their eyeballs in the sludge of the region’s hierarchies. They could not come or go from the church without getting it all over them. Naturally, they tracked the hubris of hierarchy right into their disciplinary hearings.

Congregations usually conducted these hearings once a month, often on a Friday or Saturday evening before the Sunday morning service. A moderator might begin these meetings by asking if the church was at peace. Everyone knew what this phrase meant. Baptists believed purity brought peace to a congregation. Purity also brought honor to God and a strong reputation for the church. Establishing a peaceful church meant disciplining unruly members.

After the cue from the moderator, someone would stand up with his hat in his hand and announce, for instance, that Brother Lancaster had hosted a party in a room behind his house. The party, he might add, had included fiddling and dancing. The church would then call on witnesses and give Brother Lancaster the opportunity to defend himself or apologize. If the church found him guilty, Lancaster might endure a lecture from the pastor or suspension from communion. The church might also exclude him from its fellowship.

When wayward members offered sincere apologies and asked to be restored to fellowship, Baptists nearly always forgave them—at least officially. But not everyone said they were sorry, and churches usually excluded such stubborn defendants. At Powelton Baptist Church, everyone wondered if Brother Lancaster would be the next one to be excluded.⁴

Mercer seemed convinced that no good Baptist church could ignore fiddling and dancing. But the membership filled up the pews that day because they were split on this “vexed question.” To help dispel any confusion, Mercer began by explaining in length what the Bible had to say about “worldly and giddy amusements.” Sure, Mercer said, we see stringed instruments in scripture. We also see people dancing on occasion. But music and dancing in a religious celebration is different by “nature and design” from the “lascivious hop-skip-and-tip of ‘the light fantastic toe’ of the modern dance.”⁵

When Mercer finished, he sat down. Everyone braced themselves for Lancaster’s defense of his actions. Mercer’s monologue must have been convincing. Lancaster stood up and admitted to the congregation that he had not considered himself guilty until now. He simply thought that dancing and fiddling might be more innocent amusement than the other games young people play, questionable games like Sell the Thimble and Blind Man’s Bluff. Brother Lancaster knew many of the church’s members sympathized with his situation, but he regretted that the dance may have hurt his Christian influence or reputation in the community.

Lancaster’s contrition must have pleased Mercer. This accused member appeared to be relenting and admitting his guilt. But Brother Lancaster was not finished. He had a bit more to say. As long as the church intended to “purify and elevate its standards,” he warned, then “fiddling and dancing are not all that is wrong.”⁶ For the next several minutes, Lancaster lined out a litany of local church hypocrisies that still speak to us today. He admonished the church for calling the music of a five-dollar fiddle sinful, while wealthier members enjoyed the supposedly “innocent recreation” that came from harpsichords, guitars, and \$800 pianos. Church members also “showered” rich Christians with courtesies and the best seats, but they ignored poorer believers who were forced to carry their own saddlebags and dress in homespun clothes. After

Sunday worship, wealthier members seldom invited poorer Christians home to eat with them. That responsibility usually fell to people who could hardly afford it. Lancaster even discovered that one rich member required the poor man who drove his team of horses to engage in “downright hard work” on the Sabbath.⁷

Since he had the floor, Lancaster went on to lament that the church gave “profound attention” and high praises to “big preachers” who visited, despite their “light and frothy” sermons. But when a “plain, humble,” and “devoted minister” preached from their pulpit, even if he was “full of the Holy Ghost” and courageous enough to address their “darling sins,” the church whispered contempt for that preacher. Brother Lancaster thought surely offenses like these either equaled or surpassed in their seriousness the simple fiddle music that entertained guests at his daughter’s wedding.⁸

As he spoke, Lancaster hesitated twice and tried to sit down again. He worried that he was stirring a “hornet’s nest.” But he had piqued everyone’s interest. Even Mercer urged him to continue. As long as Lancaster kept up the “proper spirit of christian [sic] affection,” the pastor believed it was high time the church determined to winnow the wheat and “get rid of the chaff.” Many in the congregation agreed and offered their encouragement. “Go on! Go on!” they hollered. “We want to know what it is that sticks in your throat.”⁹

Yes, go on, Brother Lancaster, because Baptists *still* need to hear what was sticking in your throat. You are calling our bluff. We have highlighted distinctions between people that simply do not matter in the family of God. Baptists have come to church covered in all of the world’s status symbols, and we have voted accordingly. We have given unnecessary regard to who is red or yellow, black or white, male or female, wealthy or not. These hierarchies linger, influencing the ways we treat each other in our pews and in our pulpits. Brother Lancaster, and Galatians 3:28, continue to challenge us.

Baptists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries indeed tried to cleanse themselves of some hierarchies. They blocked interference from political and religious authorities and empowered individual believers to make spiritual and moral decisions. But congregational authority, as we call it, only serves as a safeguard to help churches resist too much pressure from any single member of the family of faith. Congregational polity is not an antidote for imposition. We have countless other ways that we limit access to the avenues of influence in our churches and associations. Baptists, with our flattened hierarchies and dispersed authority, still need to rinse ourselves clean of the flimsy distinctions that support religious and social inequalities.

Brother Lancaster's sermon did "go on" that day. When he finished calling the church's bluff, he asked for its forgiveness and prayers. After all, his daughter's wedding indeed had included fiddling and dancing. But Lancaster had one final comment to make to the church's members. "We are all of us imperfect creatures," he reminded them, "and need much of that charity which we deny to others." At that, he sat down.¹⁰

Mercer stood back up, this time with tears in his eyes. He asked the church to forgive its wayward brother, and he asked God to bury "all animosities and ill feelings" toward Lancaster. Mercer closed the hearing with heartfelt prayer. The church finished with singing, and everyone rose to shake Brother Lancaster's hand.

Mercer had climbed the pulpit that day, but Lancaster had done the preaching. More than forty years later, the old member who told this story recalled that Lancaster had preached "one of the best sermons ever delivered in that house." In fact, the man said that Lancaster's monologue also marked the beginning of "the most signal revival" Powelton Baptist Church had ever experienced.¹¹

I can't promise revival, but I can promise that there is gospel in Galatians 3:28. This passage was good news in the first century. It was good news in 1817. It is *still* good news for Baptists today, especially for the least of those among us. We are all one in the family of Jesus Christ. Let's live and worship like we believe it.

¹The following story is recounted by Judge G. E. Thomas in “Rev. Jesse Mercer and his Ecclesiastical Court: A Sketch,” *Christian Index*, July 13, 1863, 4. The paper continued this story on July 24, 1863, 4. Powelton Baptist Church addressed Lancaster’s offense in at least three separate sessions. The events above possibly occurred in the final session. Unfortunately, the clerk failed to report much detail about the trial in the church’s official minutes, mentioning simply that “the difficulty was gotten over.” See Minutes, Powelton Baptist Church, September 6, 1817; October 4, 1817; November 1, 1817. Historian Gregory Wills wrote about discipline case in *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 26-27, 147n1.

²Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 13; W. Brent Jones, “‘That Peace and Brotherly Love May Abound’: Kinship and the Changing Character of Church Discipline in a Southern Primitive Baptist Church, 1814-1860” (M.A. thesis, University of Georgia, 2004), 6.

³Historians have debated the extent to which churches permitted women to vote on disciplinary matters. Gregory Wills contended that female members typically enjoyed voting privileges in southern Baptist churches. Most historians have hesitated to emphasize too strongly the extent of this practice. Jean Friedman argued, for instance, that “male-dominated trials all but excluded women from the proceedings.” See Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 51-52; Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 13.

⁴For more explanation of the procedures used in church trials, as well as Baptists’ motivations for conducting discipline, see Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 18-25, and Jones, “That Peace and Brotherly Love May Abound,” 7-9.

⁵Thomas, “Rev. Jesse Mercer and his Ecclesiastical Court,” 4.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid. The minutes of Powelton Baptist Church do not reveal significant numerical growth in the wake of this church trial, but Lancaster’s incisive and pointed comments may have revived the church in other ways. Mercer and his wife, Sabrina, for instance, seem to have enjoyed the church enough to join it. The couple moved their membership to this congregation less than four months after Lancaster’s trial. Similarly, less than two months after the trial, Lancaster willingly served on a committee with the man who originally brought his case before the church. See Minutes, Powelton Baptist Church, January 2, 1818; February 28, 1818.